

SOCIAL POLICY: Higher Education

Positions: Higher Education

LWVO believes that: (adopted May 1997)

1. The Board of Regents should be a planning and coordinating Board with broad policy-making powers.
2. The Board of Regents should be appointed by the Governor with confirmation by the Senate. The legislature should establish appropriate criteria for board members to ensure that the Board can function effectively and efficiently as a policy-making/planning body.
3. The state should provide funding to ensure that all Ohio citizens (meeting given institutional academic standards) have access to higher education that provides general education and job preparation. Ability to pay should not determine admission. (Amended May 2005)
4. In order of priority a state funding system for public higher education should be to: (Amended May 2005)
 - a. provide a basic level of support to all public institutions of higher education,
 - b. provide partial funding for capital improvements and maintenance, and
 - c. provide scholarships.

Background: Higher Education

The 1995-1997 member study of higher education focused on the role of the Ohio Board of Regents, Boards of Trustees, the Governor and the state legislature, and outlined the revenue sources for higher education in Ohio.

After the study, the League published a monograph on higher education, titled *Before the Students Arrive* (LWVOEF, 1998). The basic information from the 1998 monograph has been periodically updated. In May 2005, LWVO revised its original positions to clarify its priorities and to strengthen its advocacy posture.

The State of Ohio's need for a well-educated populace may be widely recognized, but this need has been only perfunctorily addressed in recent legislative actions. The \$51.2 billion, two-year budget passed in June 2005 continued to short-change higher education. It provided almost no extra money while it established tuition caps at 6 per cent annually. According to the Ohio Board of Regents (March 2005), state appropriations for higher education have been cut by \$344 million since 2001. The 37 state campuses covered about 25% of that "lost" revenue through cost reductions and then used tuition increases as the primary source for funding the difference.

A national study rating the 50 states on several higher education issues gave Ohio an "F" on affordability in fall 2004. An Ohio student paid about 48% of the total cost of attending a public college or university in 2004-05, compared to a national average of about 31%.

In 2005, the percentage of Ohio residents with bachelor's degrees still lagged the national average (21% in Ohio compared to 24% nationally). Ohio ranked 39th among the states in the percentage of adults with at least a four-year degree.

Legislation introduced in the 125th and 126th General Assembly displayed a scatter-shot approach to higher education issues. Affordability was not addressed on a wide scale, although special scholarship programs were approved for special groups, such as Iraq war veterans and their dependents, and for safety forces and their dependents.

Ohio's Tuition Trust Authority (OTTA), a federally sanctioned "529 Plan," marked 15 years in operation in 2004 and continued to improve and expand its college-savings offerings. Other federal policies have complicated affordability and accessibility. In 2005 changes to eligibility rules for Pell Grants resulted in reduced awards to many students and ineligibility for others. Private educational-loan firms have been allowed to collect federal government subsidies in excess of their costs, using dollars that could have expanded the Pell Grant program or other education aid.

A new sense of optimism surfaced in the higher education community with the passage of Ohio's FY 08 and FY 09 operating budget, indicating that higher education is widely viewed as a key element in the state's economic well-being. Several budget items addressed affordability head-on, one by freezing undergraduate tuition and fees for both FY08 and FY09, and others that increased scholarships.

At the same time there were major shifts in the workings of the Ohio Board of Regents (OBOR) by:

1. establishing the Chancellor position as a gubernatorial appointment with cabinet status;
2. prescribing the Chancellor's duties and fixing the Chancellor's compensation;
3. making the Chancellor appointment a five-year term, subject to the Senate's consent, with possible reappointment;
4. specifically making OBOR an advisory board to the Chancellor;
5. transferring authoritative control of the OBOR staff agency to the Chancellor;
6. shortening the term length for members of the OBOR- from nine to six years; and
7. specifying that the OBOR meet at least quarterly.

Scholarship funding received a substantial boost in the FY08-FY09 budget. The legislature created a \$100 million scholarship program designed to increase and encourage students majoring in the fields of science, technology, engineering, math, and medicine (STEMM) and established other funding to enhance institutional efforts to recruit students and scientists in STEMM fields.

Although the FY08-FY09 state budget provided a stronger level of state support for higher education than it had in decades, there are concerns to be addressed. Foremost is the worry that the state's income may not meet projected needs, forcing diminished support for the several worthy initiatives. It will take some time for the massive change in the governance of higher education to fall fully into place and to assess the benefits (and pitfalls) of having the Chancellor report to the governor. Many new working relationships need to be forged.

In 2011 the General Assembly passed the biennial budget bill and included provisions for state universities to apply to become "enterprise universities." Under the plan, the state would reduce certain mandates and regulations such as enrollment limits, laws about construction programs, and permit financing options such as lease-back agreements. The university would be required to limit its tuition increases to 3.5% per year for the period of the two year budget.

Outlook: Higher Education

The League of Women Voters of Ohio will continue to encourage a strong governance arrangement for higher education that can provide broad access to higher education for academically qualified Ohioans. Wherever it can, the League will join in requests for a widely affordable, highly accessible public higher education system in Ohio.